

THE OPENING

OF

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

CONSIDERED IN SOME OF ITS RELATIONS
TO THE PROSPECTS OF ART.

BY

JOHN RUSKIN, M.A.,

AUTHOR OF

"THE STONES OF VENICE," "THE SEVEN LAMPS OF ARCHITECTURE,"
"MODERN PAINTERS," ETC.

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER, AND CO., 65. CORNHILL.

1854.

LONDON :
A. and G. A. SPOTTISWOODE,
New-street-Square.

THE OPENING
OF
THE CRYSTAL PALACE

CONSIDERED IN SOME OF ITS RELATIONS TO THE PROSPECTS
OF ART.

I READ the account in the *Times* newspaper of the opening of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, as I ascended the hill between Vevay and Chatel St. Denis, and the thoughts which it called up haunted me all day long, as my road wound among the grassy slopes of the Simmenthal. There was a strange contrast between the image of that mighty palace, raised so high above the hills on which it is built as to make them seem little else than a basement for its glittering stateliness, and those low larch huts, half hidden beneath their coverts of forest, and scattered like grey stones along the masses of far away mountain. Here, man contending with the power of Nature for his existence; there, commanding them for his recreation: here a feeble folk nested among the rocks with the wild goat and the coney, and retaining the same quiet thoughts from generation to generation; there, a great multitude triumphing in the splendour

of immeasurable habitation, and haughty with hope of endless progress and irresistible power.

It is indeed impossible to limit, in imagination, the beneficent results which may follow from the undertaking thus happily begun. For the first time in the history of the world, a national museum is formed in which a whole nation is interested; formed on a scale which permits the exhibition of monuments of art in unbroken symmetry, and of the productions of nature in unthwarted growth,—formed under the auspices of science which can hardly err, and of wealth which can hardly be exhausted; and placed in the close neighbourhood of a metropolis overflowing with a population weary of labour, yet thirsting for knowledge, where contemplation may be consistent with rest, and instruction with enjoyment. It is impossible, I repeat, to estimate the influence of such an institution on the minds of the working-classes. How many hours once wasted may now be profitably dedicated to pursuits in which interest was first awakened by some accidental display in the Norwood palace; how many constitutions, almost broken, may be restored by the healthy temptation into the country air,—how many intellects, once dormant, may be roused into activity within the crystal walls, and how these noble results may go on multiplying and increasing and bearing fruit seventy times sevenfold, as the nation pursues its career,—are questions as full of hope as incapable of calculation. But with all these grounds for hope there are others for despondency, giving rise to a group of melancholy

thoughts, of which I can neither repress the opportunity nor forbear the expression.

For three hundred years, the art of architecture has been the subject of the most curious investigation; its principles have been discussed with all earnestness and acuteness; its models in all countries and of all ages have been examined with scrupulous care, and imitated with unsparing expenditure. And of all this refinement of enquiry,—this lofty search after the ideal,—this subtlety of investigation and sumptuousness of practice,—the great result, the admirable and long-expected conclusion is, that in the centre of the 19th century, we suppose ourselves to have invented a new style of architecture, when we have magnified a conservatory!

In Mr. Laing's speech, at the opening of the palace, he declares that "*an entirely novel order of architecture*, producing, by means of unrivalled mechanical ingenuity, the most marvellous and beautiful effects, sprang into existence to provide a building."* In these words, the speaker is not merely giving utterance to his own feelings. He is expressing the popular view of the facts, nor that a view merely popular, but one which has been encouraged by nearly all the professors of art of our time.

It is to this, then, that our Doric and Palladian pride is at last reduced! We have vaunted the divinity of the Greek ideal—we have plumed ourselves on the purity of our Italian taste—we have

* See the *Times* of Monday, June 12th.

cast our whole souls into the proportions of pillars, and the relations of orders — and behold the end! Our taste, thus exalted and disciplined, is dazzled by the lustre of a few rows of panes of glass; and the first principles of architectural sublimity, so far sought, are found all the while to have consisted merely in sparkling and in space.

Let it not be thought that I would depreciate (were it possible to depreciate) the mechanical ingenuity which has been displayed in the erection of the Crystal Palace, or that I underrate the effect which its vastness may continue to produce on the popular imagination. But mechanical ingenuity is *not* the essence either of painting or architecture: and largeness of dimension does not necessarily involve nobleness of design. There is assuredly as much ingenuity required to build a screw frigate, or a tubular bridge, as a hall of glass; — all these are works characteristic of the age; and all, in their several ways, deserve our highest admiration; but not admiration of the kind that is rendered to poetry or to art. We may cover the German Ocean with frigates, and bridge the Bristol Channel with iron, and roof the county of Middlesex with crystal, and yet not possess one Milton, or Michael Angelo.

Well, it may be replied, we need our bridges, and have pleasure in our palaces; but we do not want Miltons, nor Michael Angelos.

Truly, it seems so; for, in the year in which the first Crystal Palace was built, there died among us a man whose name, in after ages, will stand with those

of the great of all time. Dying, he bequeathed to the nation the whole mass of his most cherished works: and for these three years, while we have been building this colossal receptacle for casts and copies of the art of other nations, these works of our own greatest painter have been left to decay in a dark room near Cavendish Square, under the custody of an aged servant.

This is quite natural. But it is also memorable.

There is another interesting fact connected with the history of the Crystal Palace as it bears on that of the art of Europe, namely, that in the year 1851, when all that glittering roof was built, in order to exhibit the petty arts of our fashionable luxury — the carved bedsteads of Vienna, and glued toys of Switzerland, and gay jewellery of France — in that very year, I say, the greatest pictures of the Venetian masters were rotting at Venice in the rain, for want of roof to cover them, with holes made by cannon shot through their canvass.

There is another fact, however, more curious than either of these, which will hereafter be connected with the history of the palace now in building; namely, that at the very period when Europe is congratulated on the invention of a new style of architecture, because fourteen acres of ground have been covered with glass, the greatest examples in existence of true and noble Christian architecture were being resolutely destroyed; and destroyed by the effects of the very interest which was slowly beginning to be excited by them.

Under the firm and wise government of the third Napoleon, France has entered on a new epoch of prosperity, one of the signs of which is a zealous care for the preservation of her noble public buildings. Under the influence of this healthy impulse, repairs of the most extensive kind are at this moment proceeding, on the cathedrals of Rheims, Amiens, Rouen, Chartres, and Paris; (probably also in many other instances unknown to me). These repairs were, in many cases, necessary up to a certain point; and they have been executed by architects as skilful and learned as at present exist,—executed with noble disregard of expense, and sincere desire on the part of their superintendents that they should be completed in a manner honourable to the country.

They are nevertheless more fatal to the monuments they are intended to preserve, than fire, war, or revolution. For they are undertaken, in the plurality of instances, under an impression, which the efforts of all true antiquaries have as yet been unable to remove, that it is possible to reproduce the mutilated sculpture of past ages in its original beauty.

“Reproduire avec une exactitude mathématique,” are the words used, by one of the most intelligent writers on this subject*, of the proposed regeneration of the statue of Ste. Modeste, on the north porch of the Cathedral of Chartres.

Now, it is not the question at present, whether 13th century sculpture be of value, or not. Its

* M. l'Abbé Bulteau, *Description de la Cathédrale de Chartres*, (8vo. Paris, Sagnier et Bray, 1850), p. 98, *note*.

value is assumed by the authorities who have devoted sums so large to its so-called restoration, and may therefore be assumed in my argument. The worst state of the sculptures whose restoration is demanded may be fairly represented by that of the celebrated group of the Fates, among the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. With what favour would the guardians of those marbles, or any other persons interested in Greek art, receive a proposal from a living sculptor to "reproduce with mathematical exactitude" the group of the Fates, in a perfect form, and to destroy the original? For with exactly such favour, those who are interested in Gothic art should receive proposals to reproduce the sculpture of Chartres or Rouen.

In like manner, the state of the architecture which it is proposed to restore, may, at its worst, be fairly represented to the British public by that of the best preserved portions of Melrose Abbey. With what encouragement would those among us who are sincerely interested in history, or in art, receive a proposal to pull down Melrose Abbey, and "reproduce it mathematically?" There can be no doubt of the answer which, in the instances supposed, it would be proper to return. "By all means, if you can, reproduce mathematically, elsewhere, the group of the Fates, and the Abbey of Melrose. But leave unharmed the original fragment, and the existing ruin." And an answer of the same tenour ought to be given to every proposal to restore a Gothic sculpture or building. Carve or raise a model of it in

some other part of the city: but touch not the actual edifice, except only so far as may be necessary to sustain, to protect it. I said above that repairs were in many instances necessary. These necessary operations consist in substituting new stones for decayed ones, where they are absolutely essential to the stability of the fabric; in propping, with wood or metal, the portions likely to give way; in binding or cementing into their places the sculptures which are ready to detach themselves; and in general care to remove luxuriant weeds, and obstructions of the channels for the discharge of the rain. But no modern or imitative sculpture ought *ever*, under any circumstances, to be mingled with the ancient work.

Unfortunately, repairs thus conscientiously executed are always unsightly, and meet with little approbation from the general public; so that a strong temptation is necessarily felt by all superintendents of public works, to execute the required repairs in a manner which, though indeed fatal to the monument, may be, in appearance, seemly. But a far more cruel temptation is held out to the architect. He who should propose to a municipal body, to build in the form of a new church, to be erected in some other part of their city, models of such portions of their cathedral as were falling into decay, would be looked upon as merely asking for employment, and his offer would be rejected with disdain. But let an architect declare that the existing fabric stands in need of repairs, and offer to restore it to its original beauty,

and he is instantly regarded as a lover of his country, and has a chance of obtaining a commission which will furnish him with a large and steady income, and enormous patronage, for twenty or thirty years to come.

I have great respect for human nature. But I would rather leave it to others than myself to pronounce how far such a temptation is always likely to be resisted, and how far, when repairs are once permitted to be undertaken, a fabric is likely to be spared from mere interest in its beauty, when its destruction, under the name of restoration, has become permanently remunerative to a large body of workmen.

Let us assume, however, that the architect is always conscientious—always willing, the moment he has done what is strictly necessary for the safety and decorous aspect of the building, to abandon his income, and declare his farther services unnecessary. Let us presume, also, that every one of the two or three hundred workmen who must be employed under him, is equally conscientious, and, during the course of years of labour, will never destroy in carelessness what it may be inconvenient to save, or in cunning, what it is difficult to imitate. Will all this probity of purpose preserve the hand from error, and the heart from weariness? Will it give dexterity to the awkward—sagacity to the dull—and at once invest two or three hundred imperfectly educated men with the feeling, intention, and information, of the freemasons of the 13th century? Grant that it can do all this, and that the new building is both

equal to the old in beauty, and precisely correspondent to it in detail. Is it, therefore, altogether *worth* the old building? Is the stone carved to-day in their masons' yards altogether the same in value to the hearts of the French people as that which the eyes of St. Louis saw lifted to its place? Would a loving daughter, in mere desire for gaudy dress, ask a jeweller for a bright facsimile of the worn cross which her mother bequeathed to her on her death-bed? — would a thoughtful nation, in mere fondness for splendour of streets, ask its architects to provide for it facsimiles of the temples which for centuries had given joy to its saints, comfort to its mourners, and strength to its chivalry?

But it may be replied, that all this is already admitted by the antiquaries of France and England; and that it is impossible that works so important should now be undertaken without due consideration and faithful superintendence.

I answer, that the men who justly feel these truths are rarely those who have much influence in public affairs. It is the poor abbé, whose little garden is sheltered by the mighty buttresses from the north wind, who knows the worth of the cathedral. It is the bustling mayor and the prosperous architect who determine its fate.

I answer farther, by the statement of a simple fact. I have given many years, in many cities, to the study of Gothic architecture; and of all that I know, or knew, the entrance to the north transept of Rouen Cathedral was, on the whole, the most beautiful —

beautiful, not only as an elaborate and faultless work of the finest time of Gothic art, but yet more beautiful in the partial, though not dangerous, decay which had touched its pinnacles with pensive colouring, and softened its severer lines with unexpected change, and delicate fracture, like sweet breaks in a distant music. The upper part of it has been already restored to the white accuracies of novelty; the lower pinnacles, which flanked its approach, far more exquisite in their partial ruin than the loveliest remains of our English abbeys, have been entirely destroyed, and rebuilt in rough blocks, now in process of sculpture. This restoration, so far as it has gone, has been executed by peculiarly skilful workmen; it is an unusually favourable example of restoration, especially in the care which has been taken to preserve intact the exquisite, and hitherto almost uninjured sculptures which fill the quatrefoils of the tracery above the arch. But I happened myself to have made, five years ago, detailed drawings of the buttress decorations on the right and left of this tracery, which are part of the work that has been completely restored. And I found the restorations as inaccurate as they were unnecessary.

If this is the case in a most favourable instance, in that of a well-known monument, highly esteemed by every antiquary in France, what, during the progress of the now almost universal repairs, is likely to become of architecture which is unwatched and despised?

Despised! and more than despised—even hated!

It is a sad truth, that there is something in the solemn aspect of ancient architecture which, in rebuking frivolity and chastening gaiety, has become at this time literally *repulsive* to a large majority of the population of Europe. Examine the direction which is taken by all the influences of fortune and of fancy, wherever they concern themselves with art, and it will be found that the real, earnest effort of the upper classes of European society is to make every place in the world as much like the Champs Elysées of Paris as possible. Wherever the influence of that educated society is felt, the old buildings are relentlessly destroyed ; vast hotels, like barracks, and rows of high, square-windowed dwelling-houses, thrust themselves forward to conceal the hated antiquities of the great cities of France and Italy. Gay promenades, with fountains and statues, prolong themselves along the quays once dedicated to commerce ; ball-rooms and theatres rise upon the dust of desecrated chapels, and thrust into darkness the humility of domestic life. And when the formal street, in all its pride of perfumery and confectionary, has successfully consumed its way through the wrecks of historical monuments, and consummated its symmetry in the ruin of all that once prompted to reflection, or pleaded for regard, the whitened city is praised for its splendour, and the exulting inhabitants for their patriotism — patriotism which consists in insulting their fathers with forgetfulness, and surrounding their children with temptation.

I am far from intending my words to involve any disrespectful allusion to the very noble improvements in

the city of Paris itself, lately carried out under the encouragement of the Emperor. Paris, in its own peculiar character of bright magnificence, had nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from the gorgeous prolongations of the Rue Rivoli. But I speak of the general influence of the rich travellers and proprietors of Europe on the cities which they pretend to admire, or endeavour to improve. I speak of the changes wrought during my own lifetime, on the cities of Venice, Florence, Geneva, Lucerne, and chief of all on Rouen ; a city altogether inestimable for its retention of mediæval character in the infinitely varied streets in which one half of the existing and inhabited houses date from the 15th or early 16th century ; and the only town left in France in which the effect of old French domestic architecture can yet be seen in its collective groups. But when I was there, this last spring, I heard that these noble old Norman houses are all, as speedily as may be, to be stripped of the dark slates which protected their timbers, and deliberately whitewashed over all their sculptures and ornaments, in order to bring the interior of the town into some conformity with the “handsome fronts” of the hotels and offices on the quay.

Hotels and offices, and “handsome fronts” in general — they can be built in America or Australia — built at any moment, and in any height of splendour. But who shall give us back, when once destroyed, the habitations of the French chivalry and bourgeoisie, in the days of the Field of the Cloth of Gold ?

It is strange that no one seems to think of this ! What do men travel for, in this Europe of ours ? Is it only to gamble with French dies — to drink coffee out of French porcelain — to dance to the beat of German drums, and sleep in the soft air of Italy ? Are the ball-room, the billiard-room, and the Boulevard, the only attractions that win us into wandering, or tempt us to repose ? And when the time is come, as come it will, and that shortly, when the parsimony — or lassitude — which, for the most part, are the only protectors of the remnants of elder time, shall be scattered by the advance of civilisation — when all the monuments, preserved only because it was too costly to destroy them, shall have been crushed by the energies of the new world, will the proud nations of the twentieth century, looking round on the plains of Europe, disencumbered of their memorial marbles,—will those nations indeed stand up with no other feeling than one of triumph, freed from the paralysis of precedent and the entanglement of memory, to thank us, the fathers of progress, that no saddening shadows can any more trouble the enjoyments of the future, — no moments of reflection retard its activities ; and that the new-born population of a world without a record and without a ruin, may, in the fulness of ephemeral felicity, dispose itself to eat, and to drink, and to die ?

Is this verily the end at which we aim, and will the mission of the age have been then only accomplished, when the last castle has fallen from our rocks, the last cloisters faded from our valleys, the

last streets, in which the dead have dwelt, been effaced from our cities, and regenerated society is left in luxurious possession of towns composed only of bright saloons, overlooking gay parterres? If this be indeed our end, yet why must it be so laboriously accomplished? Are there no new countries on the earth, as yet uncrowned by Thorns of cathedral spires, untormented by the consciousness of a past? Must this little Europe—this corner of our globe, gilded with the blood of old battles, and grey with the temples of old pieties—this narrow piece of the world's pavement, worn down by so many pilgrims' feet, be utterly swept and garnished for the masque of the Future? Is America not wide enough for the elasticities of our humanity? Asia not rich enough for its pride? or among the quiet meadow-lands and solitary hills of the old land, is there not yet room enough for the spreadings of power, or the indulgences of magnificence, without founding all glory upon ruin, and prefacing all progress with obliteration?

We must answer these questions speedily, or we answer them in vain. The peculiar character of the evil which is being wrought by this age is its utter irreparableness. Its newly formed schools of art, its extending galleries, and well-ordered museums will assuredly bear some fruit in time, and give once more to the popular mind the power to discern what is great, and the disposition to protect what is precious. But it will be too late. We shall wander through our palaces of crystal, gazing sadly on

copies of pictures torn by cannon-shot, and on casts of sculpture dashed to pieces long ago. We shall gradually learn to distinguish originality and sincerity from the decrepitudes of imitation and palsies of repetition; but it will be only in hopelessness to recognise the truth, that architecture and painting can be "restored" when the dead can be raised,—and not till then.

Something might yet be done, if it were but possible thoroughly to awaken and alarm the men whose studies of archæology have enabled them to form an accurate judgment of the importance of the crisis. But it is one of the strange characters of the human mind, necessary indeed to its peace, but infinitely destructive of its power, that we never thoroughly feel the evils which are not actually set before our eyes. If, suddenly, in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap, the nearest human beings who were famishing, and in misery, were borne into the midst of the company—feasting and fancy-free—if, pale with sickness, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body, they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest, would only the crumbs of the dainties be cast to them—would only a passing glance, a passing thought be vouchsafed to them? Yet the actual facts, the real relations of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by the intervention of the house wall between the table and the sick-bed—by

the few feet of ground (how few!) which are indeed all that separate the merriment from the misery.

It is the same in the matters of which I have hitherto been speaking. If every one of us, who knows what food for the human heart there is in the great works of elder time, could indeed see with his own eyes their progressive ruin; if every earnest antiquarian, happy in his well-ordered library, and in the sense of having been useful in preserving an old stone or two out of his parish church, and an old coin or two out of a furrow in the next ploughed field, could indeed behold, each morning as he awaked, the mightiest works of departed nations mouldering to the ground in disregarded heaps; if he could always have in clear phantasm before his eyes the ignorant monk trampling on the manuscript, the village mason striking down the monument, the court painter daubing the despised and priceless masterpiece into freshness of fatuity, he would not always smile so complacently in the thoughts of the little learnings and petty preservations of his own immediate sphere. And if every man who has the interest of Art and of History at heart, would at once devote himself earnestly — not to enrich his own collection — not even to enlighten his own neighbours or investigate his own parish-territory — but to far-sighted and *fore-sighted* endeavour in the great field of Europe, there is yet time to do much. An association might be formed, thoroughly organised, so as to maintain active watchers

and agents in every town of importance, who, in the first place, should furnish the society with a *perfect* account of every monument of interest in its neighbourhood, and then with a yearly or half-yearly report of the state of such monuments, and of the changes proposed to be made upon them; the society then furnishing funds, either to buy, freehold, such buildings or other works of untransferable art as at any time might be offered for sale, or to assist their proprietors, whether private individuals or public bodies, in the maintenance of such guardianship as was really necessary for their safety; and exerting itself, with all the influence which such an association would rapidly command, to prevent unwise restoration, and unnecessary destruction.

Such a society would of course be rewarded only by the consciousness of its usefulness. Its funds would have to be supplied, in pure self-denial, by its members, who would be required, so far as they assisted it, to give up the pleasure of purchasing prints or pictures for their own walls, that they might save pictures which in their lifetime they might never behold;—they would have to forego the enlargement of their own estates, that they might buy, for a European property, ground on which their feet might never tread. But is it absurd to believe that men are capable of doing this? Is the love of art altogether a selfish principle in the heart? and are its emotions altogether incompatible with the exertions of self-denial, or enjoyments of generosity?

I make this appeal at the risk of incurring only

contempt for my Utopianism. But I should for ever reproach myself if I were prevented from making it by such a risk; and I pray those who may be disposed in anywise to favour it, to remember that it must be answered at once or never. The next five years determine what is to be saved—what destroyed. The restorations have actually begun like cancers on every important piece of Gothic architecture in Christendom; the question is only how much can yet be saved. All projects, all pursuits, having reference to art, are at this moment of less importance than those which are simply protective. There is time enough for everything else. Time enough for teaching—time enough for criticising—time enough for inventing. But time little enough for saving. Hereafter we can create, but it is now only that we can preserve. By the exertion of great national powers, and under the guidance of enlightened monarchs, we may raise magnificent temples and gorgeous cities; we may furnish labour for the idle, and interest for the ignorant. But the power neither of emperors, nor queens, nor kingdoms, can ever print again upon the sands of time the effaced footsteps of departed generations, or gather together from the dust the stones which had been stamped with the spirit of our ancestors.

PREPARING FOR PUBLICATION.

THE
THIRD VOLUME
OF
MODERN PAINTERS.

BY JOHN RUSKIN.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

Special
85-B
8165

LONDON :
A. and G. A. SPOTTISWOODE,
New-street-Square.